

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Happiness Sold Separately*

Author: Lolly Winston

Born c. 1962, in Hartford, CT; married Anders Wallgren (a consulting software engineer). Education: Attended Simon's Rock College; Bard College, B.A.; Sarah Lawrence College, M.F.A. Addresses: Home: CA. Email: lolly@lollywinston.com.

Name: Lolly Winston
Born: 1962
Education: Attended Simon's Rock College; Bard College, B.A.; Sarah Lawrence College, M.F.A.
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Career:

Writer. Previously worked as a waitress, corporate copywriter, public affairs officer for a trauma hospital, and freelance journalist; taught English as a second language and classes in writing.

Writings:

Good Grief (novel), Warner Books (New York, NY), 2004.

Happiness Sold Separately (novel), Warner Books (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor of short stories and essays to anthologies, including *The Third Berkshire Anthology*; *Girls' Night Out*; *Kiss Tomorrow Hello* Doubleday, 2006; and *Bad Girls*. Contributor of articles to periodicals, including *Redbook*, *Family Circle*, *Working Mother*, *New Woman*, *Sunset*, *Automotive News*, and *Lifetime*; contributor of short stories to periodicals, including the *Sun and Southeast Review*. *Good Grief* has been published in fifteen languages.

Media Adaptations:

Happiness Sold Separately has been made into an audiobook by Hachette Audio and is being adapted for a film produced by Julia Roberts.

Sidelights:

Author Lolly Winston has been writing in some form or another for most of her adult life, ranging from copywriting to articles automotive magazines. Fiction, however, remained her first love, and she set herself a goal of writing her first novel by the time she was forty. *Good Grief* is the result of Winston's vow. The novel recounts the story of Sophie, a young widow who at the age of thirty-six struggles to get a grip on her life and move forward. After suffering a breakdown, during which she appears at work in her robe and slippers, she knows she needs to take drastic measures. In an attempt to start over, Sophie moves to Ashland, Oregon, where things don't go precisely as she had planned.

Winston's own grief over the loss of her parents prompted her to examine the subject of how people cope with loss. Ultimately, she chose to focus on a character who has lost a spouse early in life because it is a less-common event than the death of a parent. In an interview on the Bookreporter.com Web site,



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Winston explained: "By the time I started writing the book I was married, and so I tapped into my worst fear—the death of my spouse." Winston worked on the novel part time for four years before she stopped freelancing to devote herself to finishing it.

In a review for the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin wrote of *Good Grief* that "it's capably rendered and extremely reader-friendly." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* called the book a "heartbreaking, gorgeous look at loss," and Carol Haggas, in *Booklist*, wrote that "tackling a difficult subject in a debut novel is a gutsy move, and Winston pulls it off with just the right blend of heartfelt humor and heartwarming humanity."

In her second novel, *Happiness Sold Separately*, Winston tells the story of Elinor and Ted Mackey, whose failure to become pregnant leads Ted to an affair with Gina, his personal trainer. Ted ends the affair but the couple decides to undergo a trial separation anyway. Eventually, Elinor begins to date a handsome but boring man while Ted discovers that his affair with Gina is more important to him than he thought. *Library Journal* contributor Bette-Lee Fox referred to *Happiness Sold Separately* as "Winston's bittersweet evocation of life's possibilities and disappointments and the slippery slope of being in love." Several other reviewers also specifically focused on the author's ability to write about relationships. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted the author's "real feel for the push and pull of a marriage in crisis," as well as the author's "funny, no-nonsense style." Carol Haggas, writing in *Booklist*, commented that the author "demonstrates a laserlike ability to focus on the inescapable reality of contemporary relationships."

Further Readings:

Periodicals:

- Booklist*, March 1, 2004, Carol Haggas, review of *Good Grief*, p. 1135; July 1, 2006, Carol Haggas, review of *Happiness Sold Separately*, p. 35.
- Entertainment Weekly*, April 9, 2004, Jennifer Reese, review of *Good Grief*, p. 92; August 11, 2006, Missy Schwartz, review of *Happiness Sold Separately*, p. 71.
- Hollywood Reporter*, April 22, 2004, Chris Gardner, Borys Kit, "Winston Giving Universal 'Grief,'" p. 8; December 19, 2006, "Roberts 'Sold' on Love Story," p. 48.
- Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 2004, review of *Good Grief*, p. 201; June 15, 2006, review of *Happiness Sold Separately*, p. 601.
- Library Journal*, March 15, 2004, Kellie Gillespie, review of *Good Grief*, p. 109; June 15, 2006, Bette-Lee Fox, review of *Happiness Sold Separately*, p. 61.
- Mercury News*, May 18, 2004, Mark Whittington, "Lolly Winston Writes Her Own Ticket."
- Miami Herald*, August 16, 2006, Connie Ogle, "'Happiness Sold Separately': Double Whammy Imperils a Marriage."
- New York Times*, April 21, 2004, Janet Maslin, "A Widow Becomes a Baker and Rises to the Occasion," p. E7.
- People*, April 19, 2004, Melanie Danburg, review of *Good Grief*, p. 49.
- Publishers Weekly*, March 1, 2004, review of *Good Grief*, p. 47; May 8, 2006, "Winston to Warner," p. 22; July 10, 2006, review of *Happiness Sold Separately*, p. 54.
- Variety*, December 18, 2006, "Julia Pursues 'Happiness,'" p. 4.

Online:

- AllReaders.com, <http://www.allreaders.com/> (July 26, 2004), Harriet Klausner, review of *Good Grief*.
- Armchair Interviews, <http://www.armchairinterviews.com/> (June 22, 2007), Jamie Driggers, review of *Happiness Sold Separately*.
- Bookbooters.com, <http://www.bookbooters.com/> (July 26, 2004), review of *Good Grief*.
- BookBrowse.com, <http://www.bookbrowse.com/> (July 26, 2004), review of *Good Grief*; (June 22, 2007), interview with author.



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Bookreporter.com, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (June 22, 2007), "Lolly Winston" (brief biography and an interview with author); Bronwyn Miller, review of *Happiness Sold Separately*; Shannon McKenna, review of *Good Grief*.

Conversations with Famous Writers, <http://conversationsfamouswriters.blogspot.com/> (June 27, 2006), "Lolly Winston, *Happiness Sold Separately*."

Lolly Winston Home Page, <http://www.lollywinston.com> (June 22, 2007).

Time Warner Web site, <http://www.twbookmark.com/> (July 26, 2004).*

Source:† Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Source Database:† Contemporary Authors Online



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Spotlight on: Happiness Sold Separately

Reviews:

Booklist Reviews: July 1, 2006

Infertility and infidelity pack a potent—and potentially fatal—one-two punch to Elinor and Ted Mackey's once-idyllic marriage in Winston's perceptive and poignant exploration of marital commitment and liberation. Intelligent and successful, the Mackeys appear to have everything going for them except the ability to become parents and the agility to withstand the devastating emotional impact such a loss imposes on their relationship. Her hormones in a state of turbulent imbalance, Elinor becomes alternately volatile and withdrawn, driving Ted to seek refuge at the local gym, where his nubile personal trainer, Gina, is more than willing to provide the sympathy and support he craves. Madly in love with Ted, single-mother Gina has a secret weapon to eventually win him over: her ten-year-old son, Toby, whose open adoration of Ted may prove too hard for anyone to resist. Once again, Winston demonstrates a laserlike ability to focus on the inescapable reality of contemporary relationships, tempering her characters' abject pain with appealing good humor.

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Library Journal Reviews: June 15, 2006

Corporate lawyer Elinor Mackey, now 40, wonders why she didn't try to have kids earlier. She and podiatrist husband Ted have only been married three years, but children, despite repeated IVF treatments, seem to be elusive. She funnels her sadness and fears into doing laundry. He responds to her withdrawal with frustration and by going to the gym, where he meets and eventually beds fitness instructor Gina. Elinor discovers the affair early on in this sophomore effort from Winston (*Good Grief*). It's where the couple go from there that captivates and engages the reader. The Mackeys even try to recover, but Gina's belligerent ten-year-old son, Toby, meets Ted and wants him for his math tutor. Ted loves his wife, but he can't stop thinking about having sex with Gina. Where does this leave Elinor? Finding solace under the diseased oak on her front lawn. "Ted's dating a ten-year-old," she says to neighbor Kat. "Fine. I'm dating a tree." Elinor, Ted, and Gina are well-drawn characters whose responses are intensely felt and perversely funny in Winston's bittersweet evocation of life's possibilities and disappointments and the slippery slope of being in love. Her unanticipated but still optimistic solution will resonate with readers. Highly recommended. —Bette-Lee Fox

BookPage Reviews: August 2006

Elinor Mackey's perfect marriage begins its slow disintegration when she picks up the phone and overhears her husband planning a non exercise-related rendezvous with his personal trainer, Gina. "I want to cook for you," Gina says suggestively, and Elinor knows things have spun out of control.

Actually, in her more honest moments, Elinor will admit that the marriage has been in trouble for some time. Endless rounds of failed fertility treatment have left her and Ted numb, retreating to their separate corners. Elinor spends hours in the laundry room, while Ted ostensibly passes his time getting in shape at the gym.

Elinor follows her husband to Gina's townhouse and watches helplessly as they abandon cooking for more unusual kitchen activities. "He doesn't love you, Gina!" Elinor thinks, but it turns out that it's not that simple: Ted finds himself in love with two very different women. To complicate matters even more, Gina's troubled young son has come to live with her. In desperate need of a father figure, he clings to Ted as his new role model.

Things are a mess, to be sure. All involved are paralyzed, waiting for one of the others to make the decisions that will untangle this modern-day love triangle. Elinor, who's long been at the mercy of science and fate in her efforts to have a baby, is unsure whether she has it in her to take charge of her life again.



Reading Group Guide (2)

Spotlight on: *Happiness Sold Separately*

Reviews: (continued)

Author Lolly Winston has an uncommonly deft touch while dealing with some of life's heaviest topics. In her debut bestseller, *Good Grief*, Winston won acclaim for her moving portrayal of a young woman finding a new life after her husband's death. *Happiness Sold Separately* is one of those wonderfully relatable gems that friends will pass around with a "You have to read this" recommendation. Sometimes bawdy, sometimes moving, always hilarious, this is a charming, generous book. —Amy Scribner writes from Olympia, Washington. Copyright 2006 *BookPage* Reviews.

Kirkus Reviews: June 15, 2006

A deceptively breezy, thoughtful look at the emotional complexities of a childless suburban California marriage. Lawyer Elinor Mackey's discovery that husband Ted, a podiatrist, is having an affair with his gym trainer, Gina, just scratches the surface of troublesome issues in the Mackeys' relationship. Forty-year-old Elinor has been trying to have a baby, enduring exhausting hormone injections and a miscarriage; Ted has stood by her stoically, even tenderly, though their sex life is shot. Immersed in her work as a top-notch international employee-relations lawyer in Silicon Valley, Elinor is addicted to writing lists and sorting the laundry, leaving little room for romance or even dinner with her husband. Ted wonders why she's no fun anymore and readily succumbs to Gina's seduction. Winston doesn't wrestle much with the moral questions raised by a middle-aged man falling for his trainer, nor does she offer any facile condemnation of one party or the other, delighting instead in complicating the plot at every turn. Just as the Mackeys separate and seem to be making headway in therapy, Gina's emotionally needy ten-year-old son Toby (and who knew she had a son?) decides that Ted is going to be the father figure in his life. Ted begins to tutor Toby, perhaps out of guilt, and then starts sleeping with Gina again. She remains wary, having been damaged and left vulnerable by various men in her life. Ted's initial feeling for her morphs from pity into (possibly) real love, while Elinor, more emotionally detached, attracts the local tree surgeon as well as the young man who comes to clean her house. And yet Ted loves El and only wants to be with her (doesn't he?). Pregnancy-at last!-cannot save this doomed marriage, as Elinor laments, "It's not about having a baby, it's about having a family." The author allows her characters to seethe, stumble and emerge fully human. Winston (*Good Grief*, 2004) skillfully comes into her own with this brave second novel. Copyright *Kirkus* 2006 *Kirkus*/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.

Publishers Weekly Reviews: 2006 July 15, 2006

The marriage of Ted and Elinor Mackey, a yuppie podiatrist-lawyer couple in their early-40s living in Northern California, is pushed to the brink when Elinor learns that Ted is having an affair with his trainer, Gina Ellison. Elinor's reaction—pity—surprises her. Winston (*Good Grief*) adroitly makes it clear that Ted's affair is a symptom: infertility problems have caused years of emotional turmoil. And Gina's no bimbo: she has a loving but difficult relationship with Ted, complicated further by her young son, Toby, and his immediate attachment to Ted as a stable father figure. When Elinor confronts Ted and Gina, Ted quickly ends the affair; neither is sure if infidelity or infertility should end their marriage. During their separation, Elinor takes a sabbatical from her law firm and casually dates Noah Orch, a hunky but dull arborist. Ted haphazardly resumes his relationship with Gina. As he realizes that his connection to her is more than an escape from a bad marriage, all concerned have decisions to make. Winston has a real feel for the push and pull of a marriage in crisis, and delivers it in a brisk, funny, no-nonsense style that still comes off as respectful of the material.



Reading Group Guide (3)

Spotlight on: Happiness Sold Separately

Discussion Questions From Hachette Book Group:

1. The story is told from multiple points of view. Did you find that reading each character's point of view allowed you to understand their "side" of the story better? Once you got inside a new character's head, were there things you learned about them that made them more sympathetic to you?
2. At one point, Ted seems to be in love with two women at the same time. Do you think this is possible for some people? Do you think he is in love with Elinor, or does he just love her? Can we go from one to the other and then back again?
3. While Elinor didn't put off getting pregnant, she spent many years of her life focusing on her career, and perhaps that's why she married later in life. Do you think that women who make personal sacrifices for corporate America tend to regret it more so than men?
4. How does Toby complicate the story for each of the characters? What does Ted get from his relationship with Toby and Gina that he doesn't seem to feel he gets from his marriage?
5. If Elinor hadn't miscarried, do you think she and Ted definitely would have stayed together forever?
6. Is it possible to have an amicable divorce? If so, do you think Ted and Elinor would have had one?
7. Is it ever forgivable to have an extramarital affair? If so, do you think Ted's affair was, or ever would be forgivable to Elinor? Was it understandable to you, as a reader?
8. Which of the characters did you find most sympathetic at the beginning of the novel? At the end?
9. What do you think happens after the last page of the novel? What would you do, if you were Elinor? What if you were Gina?
10. What is the significance of the tree in the yard? Does it have symbolic value?



Reading Group Guide (4)

Spotlight on: *Happiness Sold Separately*

Discussion Questions from About.com:

Happiness Sold Separately by Lolly Winston raises questions about how to stay happy in marriage and what happiness really means. Use these book club discussion questions on *Happiness Sold Separately* to lead your book club into the questions Winston raises.

Spoiler Warning: These book club discussion questions reveal important details about *Happiness Sold Separately* by Lolly Winston. Finish the book before reading on.

1. Why do you think Elinor is drawn to the laundry room? Is there anything symbolic about the elements in the laundry room?
2. Why is Ted drawn to Gina? Why does Ted keep returning to Gina even when he vows that the affair is over?
3. What do each of the people in *Happiness Sold Separately* need? Do you think they get what they need in the end? Are you satisfied with the resolution?
4. Why does Toby like Ted so much? Did Toby change how you felt about Ted and Gina? Make them more sympathetic?
5. Do you think the marriage counselor was helping or hurting Elinor and Ted's marriage? Was their marriage salvageable?
6. Do you think the infertility drove Ted and Elinor apart or were they just wrong for each other? What role do you think circumstances play in the success or failure of a marriage?
7. Do you think Ted and Elinor should stay together or do you want Ted to go with Gina? Can any one solution make everybody happy?
8. What does the title, *Happiness Sold Separately*, mean? Have you ever bought into something that turned out to be less than promised?
9. Would a baby have made Ted and Elinor happy? What do you think is the secret to happiness?
10. The story is written in a way that the reader gets to hear from several characters' points of view. Do you think this was effective?
11. Rate *Happiness Sold Separately* on a scale of 1 to 5.

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